

# **Passion for God: Compassion for the other. The essence of religious life.**

**Martha Zechmeister, CJ**

**Professor of Systematic Theology at the Jesuit University in San Salvador.**

## ***Starting point: The present situation of life in a religious order***

A sober look shows us that life in religious orders in Europe is seriously ill, or may even be dying. In a process that is developing increasingly quickly, this way of life is disappearing from the screen of public awareness and from the areas of social life. If the statistics are indeed correct, within a short time it will have been reduced to the margins of the European landscape. The former architects of European culture are becoming footnotes to it.

In addition, it often seems as if we have lost our “mysticism.” I use the word “mysticism” here initially in the colloquial meaning, as in Latin American “*mística*,” meaning that which inspires: a dynamism which supports, confronts, moves us: something which attracts us and which makes us resonate with joy and satisfaction – both as individuals as well as communities. “Back to the founders, to the well-springs of one’s own charism” was the watchword of the Second Vatican Council for the renewal of religious life. Many communities have lived this process of returning to the origins of their own charism intensely and honestly. However, the crisis has shown itself to be so all-encompassing and radical that the return to the founders and foundresses of the individual congregations has quite clearly not been enough. Not only individual communities, but all of them, and indeed all of religious life has been affected. In order to re-discover our mysticism, we need to return to the source and foundation of all religious life.

This foundation is Jesus – and foundation in this sense is much more than simply a chronological starting point. As Karl Rahner taught, this is the “*principium*” in which everything which will later develop is already present, in the kernel, so to speak, the foundation where we have to seek the decisive criteria for everything that is to come.

## ***Back to the origins***

If we are honest with ourselves, this return to the sources confronts us with an initial surprise. For, in the beginnings of the Jesus-movement, there was no monastic or religious life; at least not in the technical meaning the word has today, meaning a community of men and women living a celibate way of life. Jesus was no monk, and nor were his disciples, whether male or female. In contrast, for example, to Buddhism, Christianity is not from its origins a monastic religion. The beginning, the heart, the “principle” of Buddhism is the Sangha, the community of monks. It took centuries, however, before the first Christian monks appeared on the scene, with whom the traditions of religious life in Christianity began, and these were the decisively normative centuries during which the Christian identity was formed and consolidated.

Quite apart from this there is an obvious ambivalence in the origins of Christian monastic life. It was undeniably influenced by the subtle danger of *gnosis*, of a distortion of the Gospel, gnawing at its roots. In the “*fuga mundi*,” the anchorites’ flight from the world, Gnostic dualism makes itself clearly noticeable, the devaluation and suppression of the human body and in many cases a rather unhealthy obsession, fixated upon repressing the sexual impulses. In the beginnings of religious life there are ideals of asceticism, holiness and perfection which have little or nothing to do with the way of Jesus. This has left deep, dehumanising traces in Christianity in general, and in religious life in particular.

The mass flight from the world by the anchorites, those strange and flamboyant figures of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, is characterized by something else which cannot be simply traced back to *gnosis* or to neo-platonism. It was an energetic protest against a church of the Empire and against its liaison with imperial power. It was the historical moment in which the Church stopped being a persecuted minority and integrated into and conformed to the dominant culture at a breakneck speed. This conforming meant not only the gentrification of the Church, but also a reversal of its very being and message. The community was no longer the Church of the martyrs in the footsteps of the proto-martyr, Jesus, but had changed itself more and more into a part of that world which demanded human sacrifice, or at least was prepared to accept this as “collateral damage.” In the first monks’ *exodus* into the desert from the Imperial Church and from the “leading culture” at that time there is something vital, despite all the ambivalence regarding its connection with Jesus. What is it?

Following Johann Baptist Metz, to whom I owe the basic intuitions of my theology, I would like to formulate it as follows: In its origins, Christianity is a “youth revolt,” a youthful uprising against a decrepit religious system that had lost its living heart among its multiple regulations, externalities and power structures. It begins as an outburst of freedom against a religious system that is making deals with the politically powerful without in truth bothering one iota

about those who would be economically exploited and socially marginalized by them. Jesus reminded his own religion, Judaism, with prophetic clarity and powerful authority about its own origins: about their experience of God who led them out of slavery and beside whom there is no room for other gods, gods who legitimise the dominance of imperial supremacy and suppression.

Christians are those people who follow Jesus, and who do what he did. They risk their own lives by taking sides - without any *ifs* or *buts* - with the vulnerable, those in danger and the excluded. From its very beginnings there is only one basis from which the Church, as the community of those who follow Jesus, traces its right to exist: making the Gospel the liberating and redeeming reality in the middle of whatever is oppressing, tormenting and enslaving people here and now. The first monks appeared on the scene exactly at the historical moment when the Church was for the first time seriously about to betray its very being, its vocation, its mission.

In the Seventies Johann Baptist Metz defined religious life as “the Holy Spirit’s shock therapy for the Church,” as the “institutionalised form of a dangerous reminder in the heart of the Church.”

Religious life must be the thorn, the restlessness, the constant impetus, forbidding the Church to make its peace with the powers of the world. In a bourgeois Church it should clamour urgently and persistently for adhering to the roots of the Gospel and for the radicality of discipleship.

Nowadays such language does not seem quite fitting or really appropriate for our present situation. Indeed the religious men and women of Europe today hardly seem to be an army of “youthful rebels.” It seems to us, therefore, to be wiser to speak with quieter voices and to make our presence felt more discreetly. To be quite honest, this new humility occasionally seems to me to be pretty suspicious. If religious life no longer “scandalizes,” if it no longer creates any kind of irritation by its prophetic charism, either within or outside the Church, then something is going drastically wrong.

### ***New creation of the Spirit in the breakups of history***

In my opinion we find again the dynamism of the beginning of Christianity in the “first kindling” of the authentic foundation of any religious order, at least in the origins of the great archetypal forms of religious life. Over the centuries, in various historical contexts and with varying features, a certain pattern can be observed which can be described somewhat like this: in the ruptures of history and in the decline and fall of cultures one particular configuration of the Church, interwoven with the dominant culture and dependent upon it, comes to a crisis or reaches its end. This is what happened when the barbarians stepped onto the stage of history at the end of the Roman Empire; and again in the 12<sup>th</sup> and

13<sup>th</sup> centuries as the medieval towns were on the ascendant and the accumulation of riches and capital brought misery and poverty to the vast majority of the populace. In these painful historical upheavals and rejections, on the threshold of new epochs, the old recipes are quite clearly no longer of use. Contrary to the gravitational force exerted by institutions and ecclesiastical power, all deeply rooted in the structures of a declining world, time and again religious life has shown itself to be the Holy Spirit's special surprise, at exactly these moments. Some bold souls have risked leaving obsolete forms behind, and yet this was at the same time a return to the origins, to the beginnings. The Spirit made use of its own in order to bring about a "new creation": new types of human community in which Jesus was present with new freshness and immediacy.

There is little doubt that today we are yet again in such a time of upheaval with all the rejections and crisis symptoms that belong to it. The social and institutional configuration of the Church has grown old – and likewise that of religious life. They have obviously lost the connection to the claims and challenges of the real world and the horrors and the anguish which are indeed threatening people today. Perhaps the first and most important step would be to admit this with honesty and without self-pity and nostalgia. If the Church and religious life is to have a future, we have to start by not avoiding the realization that we are completely dependent on a "new creation of the Spirit" which lies far beyond our good will for reform, as sincere as this might well be. The "*ars moriendi*," the art of not holding on to what we already know, and freeing ourselves from worrying about our own future, as individuals and as communities, is the first necessary step so that the Spirit can awaken new life in dried out bones.

*On its own* the Church is "nothing," it is basically "eccentric," as in "off-centre," or else it is not the Church of Jesus Christ. The Church does not *have* a mission, it *is* mission, existing on behalf of someone else, and *being for others*. There is no mediation of the Gospel without devoting oneself to those for whom the message is intended; there can be no transmission without submission. The gravitational force of the institution, however, means that the Church is in constant danger of betraying this innermost being. A Church which fights for its own interests *as if it were an end in itself* is incapable of being the bearer of the word of reconciliation and redemption for mankind and for the world."

In view of this danger, the Spirit has always awoken religious women and men so that they can be like thorns in the body of the Church, "dangerous reminders" of what it means to be Christian and to belong to the community of Jesus. What is true for the Church as a whole is even more true for religious life. There can be no identity "on its own," and we do not "*have*" a mission, as if it were something additional, as in yet another *task*. Liberating ourselves from anxiety about our own survival and our own identity, living completely in service to God

by serving others is what characterizes religious life and is the fundamental feature of a mysticism of mission.

***The “mysticism of open eyes” – or against the docetist view of religious life***

An abstract altruism is not enough. Often enough we think of ourselves as being to a great extent selfless, and succumb to a form of pious self-deception. We are taking as our frame of reference a world which does not exist, or has not existed like this for a long time. We are in danger of moving in a dream or phantom world and of losing our sense of reality.

Risking exposing ourselves to the real world, and getting involved with living people - with their concrete difficulties and needs - will shake us out of unreality and out of ourselves. It will challenge and frequently shake us to the very foundations of our way of looking at the world, let alone our self-confidence. The process is almost inevitably accompanied by fear and all kinds of psychological desolation. Really getting involved with other people demands having a healthy ability to form relationships, and will change us profoundly. Mortification, dying to oneself, losing one's life in order to find it: all of this does not mean “art for art's sake,” not even for the sake of spiritual art, but gains true and real-life meaning in this context.

“Seeking God” is the essence of religious life in all of its forms. However, if this search is truly Christian and the living God of Jesus Christ is meant, then it never takes place alienated from the real, the concrete physical world. Erich Przywara, one of the great precursors of the Second Vatican Council, once wrote: “We do not bump into God, not even if we dig ever so deeply into the mine-shafts of the human soul.”

Whoever seeks God in particular by introspection, by diving into the depths of his or her own soul, is in great danger of falling victim to the deception of his or her own projections. The first step to encountering God is to clash against reality which is neither invented nor dreamed up by ourselves. We bump into God by bumping into harsh and occasionally brutal reality. It resists our manipulations, and against it the ideas and images about God which we have invented simply disintegrate. In an extremely short poem, Pedro Casaldaliga, the Claretian poet and bishop of a diocese with a predominantly indigenous population in Brazil, utters a cry: “Everything is relative, apart from God and hunger.”

The best way to approach the mystery of the living God is to get involved with the mystery of other people. This “other” one never lets himself be reduced to a copy of myself, he or she is not the same as me, and indeed the nearer I come to him or her, the more I experience him as the unknown, the stranger, sometimes so alien that it shocks me deeply and frightens me. This “other one” reveals himself to me as one who resists any seizure by me. I use violence against him if I try to

understand him and to educate him “according to my image and likeness” and he questions and challenges my own identity in a radical and threatening way. “Anyone who says: ‘I love God’, and hates his brother, is a liar, since a man who does not love the brother that he can see cannot love God, whom he has never seen.” (1 John 4: 20)

Johann Baptist Metz defined Christian mysticism as “*mysticism of open eyes*”

. The Christian experience of God has nothing to do with shutting our senses to the external world, but rather with an awakening, an awakening from our dreams and fantasies into the real world, created and loved by God, and yet at the same time a world which has been perverted and disfigured by scandalously unjust distribution, in which millions of people are starving, are confronted with deadly violence and die untimely, brutal deaths. One of the questions which worries me most is this: How can the message of the parable of the good Samaritan be translated into the context of a globalised world? It is not just “one” who falls prey to robbers, but a large percentage of the whole of humanity who are at the mercy of bandits, of those who play the stock market, arms dealers and profiteers. Metz speaks of the “categorical imperative” which is inevitable for whoever resists the temptation to immediately close his eyes again. He is quoting the Jewish philosopher Hans Jonas: “Look and you will know.”

Can we stand to look – or is what we see so depressing, overwhelming even, that it cripples us and floods us with feelings of helplessness?

“*No-one shall see me and live.*” (Ex 33:20). Setting out to seek God seriously is a challenging and dangerous adventure. The “dark night” and the “mystical death” is not a peculiar state of the soul, but rather means getting involved with God in the reality of this world – a world which seems to be in loud contradiction to him. In one of her most beautiful poems Nelly Sachs, a survivor from Auschwitz, writes:

“Only a few of the great broken-hearted  
have loved so much  
that the granite of the night burst open”

### **“Christ-shaped” in active solidarity with the poor**

“*The Christian of tomorrow will be a mystic or he won’t be at all.*” This aphorism of Karl Rahner’s certainly expresses a basic and profound truth. Pedro Casaldaliga has taken it still further and made it more precise, by saying that the Christian of tomorrow will be poor, united with the poor, or he won’t be at all: “I am thinking of what Karl Rahner said when he wrote: in the 21st century the Christian will be a mystic or he will no longer be Christian. There is no question for me that Karl Rahner is the greatest theologian of the 20th century. However, I believe with the

unshakeable conviction of the Gospels that today in the 21<sup>st</sup> century a Christian is either poor or is in his innermost being (viscerally, from the guts) united with the poor, involved in the cause of the poor, or else he (or she) is not a Christian. Not one of the famous *characteristics of the true Church* holds true if the Church forgets the fundamental characteristic which is the closest of all to the Gospel: the option for the poor.”

Such words are certainly not aiming at the “anthropological reduction” of Christianity, a “godless humanism,” but rather give shape to the “where” and “how” of encountering God. Nobody can seriously seek God without fighting with untiring zeal for a more just world. “He judged the cause of the poor and needy; then it was well. Is not this to know me? - says the Lord” (Jer 22:16). “Knowing” in the Bible always means more than an intellectual process; “knowing” means an encounter which takes place in the depths of the person and which includes complete devotion to another. Nobody can “know God” who is not open to his presence in the vulnerable and the disadvantaged – and the awareness of this presence leads inevitably to activity and to conflict.

Christian mysticism is therefore a “mysticism of action,” but not, however, merely one of *activism*. Neither apathy nor resignation can lead anywhere, but equally neither can fanaticism nor aggressive, ideological doggedness. On the contrary, the way is one of sober acknowledgement of just how limited our possibilities to act actually are, while at the same time mobilizing all our energy in order to act like Jesus. “*In actione contemplativus*,” “contemplative in action,” is one of the keywords of Ignatian spirituality. What it means precisely is that we should bring our own activity into line with the activity of Jesus, to allow ourselves to embark on a process which will let us become increasingly more “Christ-like” and which seizes hold of the centre of our very person. Activity, sheer doing, demands all our potential and actual energy – and yet is at the same time completely compliant and passive, because it hands itself over totally to God’s activity in us. By allowing *his* activity to be the decisive criterion for *our* activity, we are changed into Christ and accepted by the Father in the Son as his beloved sons and daughters.

And St. Paul at the height of this experience says, “It is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me,” (Gal 2:20). It is a process of a radical transformation, a true dying to self. This, however, has nothing alienating about it, but rather awakens all of the human potential slumbering within us and lets us become men and women in the fullness of our being. If the experience is true, then it fills us with a deep satisfaction and joy, even if it may indeed often mean joy among the tears.

### ***“The authority of the suffering”***

Everything that Jesus does, he does in obedience to the Father. But how do we know that we are not falling into the trap of self-deception? That we are not doing something merely on our own initiative, but really doing “what is pleasing to the Father”? Within the logic of the traditional concept of religious life, the matter was relatively simple and clear-cut: the conveyor of divine will was the authority of the Church and by obeying this authority we fulfill the will of God. But does this really correspond to the charism of religious life and its prophetic vocation? Where and through which authority does God speak to us in such a way that it indeed demands our unconditional obedience and the response of our whole existence? Following Johann Baptist Metz, I would like to offer the following formulation: It is specifically the “authority of the suffering” which absorbs us totally and which confronts us with the divine will. Those who perish through starvation or from violence as a consequence of a scandalously unjust distribution, the migrants who are “turned away” from the southern borders of Europe; basically everyone of whom the little apocalypse in the Gospel of St. Matthew (Mt 24 – 25) speaks – they are the authority which we, without any ifs or buts, need to obey. No authority, not even the highest authority of Church hierarchy comes above this. A mature sense of obedience and mature love of the Church knows that this is the noblest religious life vocation – the service which we indeed owe the Church – to submit to the authority of the victims and to plead prophetically for the whole Church to be determined by this authority.

### ***Mission – a movement from the centre to the periphery***

In times of crisis in the Church, in times when it is in danger of losing its Jesus-like face, the Spirit obviously prefers to break in from the margins, sometimes from margins which stand under the suspicion of heresy. Even the beginnings of monasticism took place on the borders of the main Church and the integration of the monks was a vital question for it. It was the same case in the poverty movements of the 12th and 13th centuries and finally a good number of founders and foundresses found themselves under the spotlight of the Inquisition.

Mission is a centrifugal dynamism, a movement away from the centre to the margins. It is a movement towards the marginalised, in order to become the sacrament of unity, the instrument of the inclusion of outsiders and the excluded. Religious life can be defined as exactly that impetus in the life of the Church which keeps this dynamism alive. Its most appropriate place is on the edge, at the periphery, in company with the outsiders. Its greatest temptation is the desire to belong to the centre or to transform itself so as to become the centre.



If religious life allows itself to be led by coveting power, or if it lets itself be dominated or simply domesticated by Church structures, then the salt has lost its taste and is of no value any more. The former is more the male version. This is why Ignatius of Loyola insisted that Jesuits make a promise, in addition to their vows, neither to covet church benefices nor to accept them. As women such a promise is not necessary, but we are in no less a danger. In order to feel loved and accepted, we often betray our charism and set ourselves up as supporting the system. The prophetic thorn has then become more like 3-in-1 oil, a lubricant, that just keeps the *status quo* up and running.

For Jon Sobrino, marginality, as the place most suited to religious life, means: “desert, periphery and front-line.” The “natural” place for religious life is where nobody wants to go, where there is no power, but where powerlessness is concentrated, where you take high risks, even as far as risking your own life; “where more than anything prophetic action is necessary in order to pull the Church out of its apathy which is threatening to turn everything into stone, or to uncover sin more energetically”

Our world is not an innocent place, but rather a place of conflict, a battlefield. As religious men and women we should not be protecting our innocence, but rather risking ourselves unreservedly for others – and thus living out our devotion to the mystery of God.

### ***Daring to be crazy – or mystical ecstasy***

Religious life is in a certain way not essential for the Church – and that gives us a great deal of freedom. For this very reason we can allow ourselves the luxury of giving up defending our own existence, of breaking out of known parameters and of responding with freedom and creative fantasy to the various situations in this world of ours which call out more for redemption and salvation. It is not necessary for us to behave like senior altar servers of the church system. The Church deserves our mature love and not infantilism. Neither the church structures nor the petrified traditions of religious life should be determining our being and our doing, but instead only the obedience with which we bring our activity into harmony with the activity of Jesus: singing God’s praise whilst risking the “intolerable exaggerations” of the Gospel and the discipleship of Jesus. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the great martyr of the Lutheran Church, says in one of his most beautiful sermons: “(...) where do we get the insane arrogance to spiritualize these acts Christ performed with such a straightforward concern for the realities of everyday life? We simply must stop this shameless, hypocritical spiritualizing of the Gospel. Take it as it is, or hate it honestly! (...) Is it not simply cynical to speak of heavenly comfort because one is unwilling to give earthly comfort? (...) Does it not show that we basically do not take their suffering seriously, but cynically hide behind pious rhetoric?”

Let's not be hypocritical, let's not live in a world of illusions and fantasies! Instead let's be prepared to allow the love of God to become incarnate in this real world about us.

If we really do this, religious life, as we know it and as we have lived it up to now, will be shaken up and radically changed. "Orders" comes etymologically from "order," as in regimented, everything in its place, all under control. Does not this chain of associations to a certain extent describe the exact opposite of self-giving devotion? And does not this inevitably bring with it the danger of sterility? "And someone else will fasten a belt around you and take you where you do not wish to go." (John 21:18) "Losing control," giving up your own status and your own importance could be the beginning of a hitherto unknown freedom, of a new fruitfulness and joy.

Christian mysticism always is a mysticism of the way: following Jesus – risking ourselves for the sake of those who are in danger of getting trapped between the cog-wheels – losing ourselves in the mystery of God. "Wanderer, there is no path, the path creates itself in the walking," is one of the most beautiful verses of the Spanish poet Antonio Machado. Our path is, however, not one of solitary walking, but rather a being on the road together with a people. It is a walking together with my fellow men and women and together with my wounded brothers and sisters who become companions and guides on the way to the mystery of God.

From the Third World, therefore, Pedro Casaldáliga responds to Antonio Machado:

Let the song of your people  
become the rhythm of your step.  
Shake off your long lethargy  
leave nostalgia behind you,  
Whoever walks in hope,  
is already living his tomorrow.